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Title: "Writing the City": Representations of the Indian Metropolitan Space in Select Twenty-First-Century Writings in English

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Synopsis

I intend to study select contemporary English writings (both fiction and non-fiction, and both by the Indian and western writers) which have for their setting and subject the current megacities of India.[1] I wish to focus on how the 'city' is represented in these texts and how these representations can be seen as continuous dialogues and interactions at multiple levels between the writer and the city vis-à-vis its historical, cultural, social, economic as well as political contexts. It is also pertinent to examine how the writer's professional and personal backgrounds and their target audience significantly influence their perspectives. The principal argument propelling my project is that the 'city' is essentially a 'deferred' construct. The moot question that my dissertation proposes to address is whether there is any sort of continuity, any overarching and inclusive identity underlying the fractured, fragmented space called the city; and to what extent such a sense of continuity and inclusiveness is formative and germane to the idea and construct of the city.

After 1991, that is, after the economic liberalization, India has witnessed sweeping changes in all quarters of private and collective existence. The new economic reforms, popularly known as the 'Liberalization', 'Privatization' and 'Globalization' (LPG model)[2] were aimed at making the Indian economy one of the fastest growing economies as well as globally competitive one. Indeed, the Indian economy has continued to grow since India stepped into the new millennium with a dream of becoming a future superpower of the world. However, this transition has not been a linear and all-inclusive one. Further, not just in the economic, but also in social, cultural and political arena the Indian reality is marked by disproportion, ambiguities and contradictions at multiple levels. As the noted journalist and writer Sam Miller aptly observes in the prologue of his *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India through Foreign Eyes* (2014), India has always defied easy explanation.

In this context, it is interesting to examine the in-betweenness that characterises the Indian cities. A city is a volatile space: it is constantly evolving. A city also has to be 'living', it cannot afford the stagnancy which perhaps the smaller towns or villages may afford or even welcome. For a city, if it stops changing, it would eventually mean that it is 'dead'. Yet, this notion of 'living' has its myriad aspects. Consequently, a metropolitan space is by no means a singular concept. Everyone has a different conception/ perception about his/her own city. And yet, a city accommodates everyone and everything. The idea of 'living' also essentially entails the idea of 'growing'; and cities grow rapidly; indeed, they always aspire to becoming 'world

class'. However, there does not seem to exist a yardstick or a finishing line for this journey. Thus in the context of the cities, the notions of 'living' and 'growing' becomes increasingly problematic and non-linear in nature.

My proposed dissertation will focus on the texts which are produced during the twenty-first century, that is, from the year 2000 till the present time. Further, these texts can be broadly divided into two categories. First, works of fiction and non-fiction writings by the Indian writers (both residing in India, and non-resident) generically ranging from essays, novels, memoirs, and travelogues; and, secondly, those of the western writers.

First, this dissertation would seek to explore the texts' varied responses to India's economic conditions in the twenty-first century, both its achievements and its drawbacks. While India boasts of being the world's third largest economy, a major stratum of its population still remains below the poverty level and a substantial percentage of the same dwells in the cities – in slums or elsewhere. This situation has been dealt with in several writings. In his two books *India's Unending Journey* (2008) and *India: The Road Ahead* (2011), which were published within barely three years of each other, Mark Tully offers markedly contrasting perspectives on economic progress in Indian cities; the former one being a lot more optimistic and upbeat than the latter. Patrick French expresses a largely optimistic view about the same in his *India: A Portrait* (2010). The widening gulf between rich and poor has been one of the prime concerns in several texts. Whereas slums are a palpable cause for anxiety in *Maximum City* (2004), the protagonist in Paul Theroux's novella 'The Gateway of India' (from *The Elephanta Suite*, 2007), an American business traveller, goes from a distanced loathing of Mumbai to discovering personal freedom in the squalor of the slums.

Secondly, my dissertation will attempt to analyze how the cities and its people embody and supersede their national, global, and regional identities. There has always been the argument that one of the influences of 'globalization' is the so called 'homogenization', that is, transformation and assimilation of the local into the global. Big shopping malls, trade centres, high-rises, flyovers, glass houses, billboards and sign-boards of the multinational companies – all render a homogenized look to the cities. From mode of thinking to dressing sense, the local 'flavours' are scarcely found. The 'Americanization' of India has played a part in the plot of *The White Tiger* (2008) by AravindAdiga where to satisfy Pinky's desire for American culture, Ashok moved to Gurgaon. However, there is always a flip side to it. Traditionally, nostalgia, longing for the roots, yearnings for old values and customs – all these have always been ingrained in the collective consciousness of the country as a whole. Hence, the cities have become a meeting-space for all kinds of beliefs and thoughts, which often strive for a 'balanced' approach to life as a whole.

Further, while they do retain a common frame of national (and international) identities, no two cities are alike in their cultural, social and historical background, and therefore, each of them demonstrates some attributes which are quintessentially and organically its own. *Bombay, merijaan* (2003) a collection of essays edited by Jerry Pinto and NareshFernandes, offers several writings on all things which are peculiar to Mumbai. RanaDasgupta, in his *Capital: A Portrait of the Twenty-First Century Delhi* (2014) has argued that Delhi turned out very differently from New York and Paris because of its particular history and culture. It is fascinating how these cities

seek to cling to their respective uniqueness and exclusive identities while at the same time aspiring to have all the features of an international megacity.

Thirdly, it is very interesting to examine how several locales and places within a city embody a certain distinct 'space' which renders a unique aspect to the city and it often stands out markedly different from the other places of the same city, while remaining an integral part of the same. Sam Miller in his story "Going Underground" (from *The Weekenders Adventures in Calcutta*, 2004) narrates how, while entering the RabindraSadan metro station, "metro passengers are informed they are entering a different world, and that a very different behavior is expected of them" (O'Hagan, p.229). He goes on to cite several forbidding signs such as, "sitting, gossiping on metro staircase is strictly prohibited" and "time spending is prohibited in metro premises." Murzban F. Shroff, in his *Breathless in Bombay* (2008) captures a detailed picture of the Mahalaxmi Dhobi Ghat of Mumbai. RanaDasgupta and Sam Miller has dealt with the ChandniChowk area of the Old Delhi.

Fourthly, instances of violence and natural calamities and the responses of the cities to those incidents also have a large stake in how a city's image is construed. Be it riots and several terror attacks on Mumbai, communal riot and terrorist attack on the parliament in Delhi, political violence and activism in Kolkata, all these things have influenced several writers and films have also been made on those occurrences. Mumbai's much talked about unflinching spirit against all odds has found praise many a time, especially when dealing with external enemies, especially terror attacks. Historical narratives like *Mumbai Fables* by GyanPrakash are testimonies to that. However, dealing with internal conflicts and communal clashes has been much more complex. Although Edward Luce in his *In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India* (2008) lauds India's long tradition of pluralism and asserts that it has given the country hundreds of years of practice at managing social conflicts without automatic resort to violence, communal clashes and internal conflicts did disturb various Indian cities a number of times. Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014) deals with the 1960s when Kolkata (then Calcutta) was convulsed by the Naxalite movement. It analyzes the past incidents from a present perspective and observes how those occurrences have shaped or altered the present shape and identity of a city that it currently is. It would also be interesting to see if the western and Indian writers' perspectives vary or overlap on the question of violence.

Fifthly, this dissertation wishes to examine how the underbelly of the cities is portrayed in these texts and how the treatment of the same varies. Sonia Falerio in her *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* (2012) revisits the noir world of the dance bars made famous by Hindi films like *Chandni Bar* (2001) and *Chameli*(2004). However she refuses any kind of romanticization of the seedy underworld of the city. Suketu Mehta's *Maximum city* (2004) includes stories of the underworld and also talks about don like ChhotaShakeel. *Shantaram*(2003) by Gregory David Roberts is a compelling autobiographical novel of an Australian criminal who escapes to a new life in Mumbai.

Primarily, the theoretical framework for this research would be based on various urban theorists like Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Lewis Mumford and others. This study would aim to examine the empirical relevance of their theoretical formulations to understand Indian urban experience as it is embedded in the narratives on the city. One can identify three distinct strata along which arguments have been mostly directed. They are, tentatively, first, the city as medium and site of capital accumulation; second, the city as a space of social control; and third, the city

as a setting of modern and more so of postmodern experiences. Following Karl Marx, several theorists like Max Weber, Henri Lefebvre, Saskia Sassen, all have addressed the changing relations of production in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society from varying perspectives and diverse focus. These theorists would come in while analyzing the texts' varied response to the economic scenario of the Indian metropolises. Similarly, theorists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and W. E. B. Dubois analysed how collective conscience, surveillance strategies constituting modern subjects, marginalized and oppressed beings guided the particular experiences of social control in urban societies. Cities are also the settings for modern and postmodern experiences. Theorists have looked at various issues like alienation (Karl Marx), the relation of the country and the city experiences (Raymond Williams), flaneur (Walter Benjamin) which in a sense dealt with the peculiarities of the modern urban experiences. Theorists like Edward Soja have looked at the restructuring and peculiar process of spatialisation associated with postmodern cultures. Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined communities' is also important in this context, because, as noted by Alev Cinar and Thomas Bender in the introduction of their book Locating the Modern Cities (2007) that, "just as nations are imagined communities, it is possible to conceive of cities as imagined places or as an "imagined environment"…the role of print capitalism – the engine of Anderson's interpretation of the emergence of nationalism – may be even clearer in respect to modern cities"(xii).These discourses would help to analyse the collective as well as individual identity that the metropolitan space embodies and experiences that it offers.

Notes:
1. A megacity is usually defined as a metropolitan area with a total population in excess of ten million people. According to the census data of India 2011, there are three megacities in India. These are, Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata. (see Census of India, p2)
2. For further information on the LPG model, see Kulwant R Gupta, 702

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